



# EVERY ROAD HAS A STORY

BY GINNY BARNES

*Berryville Road is designated as an Exceptional Rustic Road.*

It all starts with the word rustic: an adjective that evokes country life, a simpler time in a rural landscape, a time when agriculture and the movement of agricultural products defined road systems that gave passage from farm to nearby mill, then on to market or river for transport to larger towns or cities. Montgomery County has a rich farming history which was still lively and widespread into the middle of the 20th century. Orchards and farms still operated in between post World War II housing tracts just beyond the boundaries of Washington, DC. That farming history and

its vibrant present is now concentrated in the protected 93,000-acre Agricultural Reserve.

By the 1960's, paving, widening and altering of existing roads to accommodate development had alerted residents to the impending loss of something that bound them to history, or took them past a local stream where a grain mill or one-room schoolhouse once stood. The practice reached epic proportions when, in the 1980's, approved housing developments even included requirements to upgrade roads miles from the project itself.

The rapidity of changes aroused community concerns about a loss of scenic beauty, of special environmental features and a heritage we'd only begun to document. Several near losses of one-lane bridges and uniquely picturesque roads led to citizen leaders speaking out. As a result, the Montgomery County Council created a Task Force in 1989 to study a Rural/Rustic Roads Program. In 1990, it recommended creation of such a program noting that there are roads throughout the County which reflect our

agricultural origins or glimpses of particular scenic beauty, and unless protective measures were taken, continued development of the County would alter or annihilate them forever.

The Task Force offered an extensive list which became an interim list of 91 roads. These were protected by legislation in 1993. Through the 1996 Rustic Roads Functional Master Plan and with subsequent subregion Master Plans, the list was fully reviewed. Since a Functional Master Plan is a living document, nominations for inclusion are still being taken.

Two road classifications were created: Rustic and Exceptional Rustic. The first is a road which "enhances the rural character of the area due to its particular configuration, alignment, scenic quality, landscaping, adjacent views, and historic interest, and which exemplifies the rural and agricultural landscape of the county."

Exceptional Rustic goes a step further, being defined as: "having such unusual and pleasing character as it exists today that preservation of the road in its current state is highly desirable. The road has special characteristics which contribute significantly to the rural, scenic, or historic features of Montgomery County and might lose these specific characteristics if improved or widened." County regulations created in 1996 further defined criteria for designation.

Currently there are 98 roads in the program, roughly covering 190 miles. The designated roads vary in width but are generally narrow serving low traffic volume. They have outstanding natural features at the borders. Stately trees, pastoral vistas, stream valleys, wetlands as well as working farms. Many follow historic alignments or lead to historic sites. They are all threads to our past.

I live in an old log cabin set back off an Exceptional Rustic Road in Potomac's historic Glen. Nearby still stands a house once known as the Peters Store in the late 19th century. It sold every-

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thing from oranges to nails, had a post office and was known as Glen, Md. Two bridges over two streams meet here, a one-lane and two-lane bridge. All the roads leading into and out of the Glen are Rustic. Gone is the Glen Mill that stood on the banks of Watts Branch stream, which was dammed to provide water for the mill race. As the bridges were the only way to cross both streams, the area became a fishing hole and gathering place. Though perhaps invisible to today's traveler, scraps of history and folklore live here as they do on every Rustic Road. As in the Glen, many rustic roads follow previous native American Indian trails that

gave access to tool making sites or favored hunting grounds.

A recently produced Rustic Roads bumper sticker rightly declares "every road has a story." Such stories contribute to the sense of connection with the geography we habitually traverse. Robert Hanson, a farmer now in his 90's, who served on the Rustic Roads Task Force and later on the Advisory Committee established to revise the Potomac Subregion Master Plan once asked if we knew why South Glen Roa leveled out halfway up the steep climb from the stream and the Glen Mill. It was intentional he said, so the horses pulling wagons loaded with flour and meal could rest briefly before continuing the journey out of the valley.

Caroline Taylor who lives in the Ag. Reserve tells a story that speaks to the sense of open space Rustic Roads add to our rural landscape. Driving home at night on Hughes Road which follows the gentle contours of adjacent farm fields, she saw a rabbit run in front of her. As it reached the other side, a great grey owl swooped down and grabbed it. The image stayed with her, imparting a sense of wonder and gratitude for living where the natural world has its way.

Anyone who has traveled on rustic roads in the upper county might wonder about the occasional narrow concrete strip. Exceptional Rustic Martins-

burg Road contains a one mile, single lane of concrete laid in 1931, typical of the first roads paved for automobile use. Known as politicians' pig paths, they nearly always ended at the gate of some person of political influence. But Martinsburg Road has a much longer history. The section from Route 28 to Wasche Road was established in 1838 due to a petition from local farmers and businessmen seeking access to local mills and the C&O Canal. As was custom, stone walls were built to line both sides. It was named in 1866 for the black community located at the intersection with Whites Ferry Rd.

The Rustic Roads Advisory Committee (RRAC), and three agencies now oversee the program: Maryland National Capital Park and Planning Commission (MNCPPC), Montgomery County Department of Transportation (MCDOT) and the Montgomery County Department of Permitting Services (MCDPS). Just over 20 years old with a proven success, it has received a number of honors including the Montgomery Prize from Montgomery Preservation, Inc. and the Royce Hanson Award from Montgomery Countryside Alliance (MCA).

In 2012, the RRAC and MCDOT created a special street sign with a brown background to distinguish Rustic Roads from the green road signs we usually see. The transition will take time but eventually all Rustic Roads will be easily identifiable. Not only does this help travelers, but it also aids the many farm businesses aiming to attract day visitors who seek fresh local food and a connection with farming and open spaces. The recent interest in agrotourism, common in countries like Italy, offer a way to enrich and extend the experience of visiting local farms. Montgomery County and area nonprofits have implemented start-up and mentor programs to train young, upcoming farmers to assure a continued working landscape.

Rustic Roads still face challenges from incremental widening, loss of roadside habitat and ongoing development sprawl. Yet in 20 years, the program has yielded many benefits. There is poetry in rustic roads—a sense of peace in an often clamorous world and a deeply spiritual connection to our history on the land.

*Ginny Barnes is an artist, environmental activist and sometimes writer who holds a special love for trees and forests.*

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